

College Writing: My Name Is

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Recommended Citation

Young, Fifi, "College Writing: My Name Is" (2007). *Undergraduate Library Research Awards*. 3.
<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ulra/awards/2007/3>

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My Name Is

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about my name and names in general. If you were born with a name like Fifi, you'd understand. Growing up with an uncommon name in the U.S. has always been a sort of a complex for me. If I lived in France, it would have been a different story, my friend told me. "I screamed out Fifi, and like, 12 heads turned," she reported after her trip to Paris.

It does a lot to a kid when she's called PeePee by the Chinese Sunday School teacher or by other children. I think this statement can be further reinforced by the fact that I truly remember where I was situated, the tone of the teacher's voice, and even what the lighting was like in the room when she asked my name and audaciously called me PeePee after I answered. I even remember retaliating by calling my classmate Jeremy, Germy, when he called me PeePee in kindergarten. After my justice was served, I climbed up the slide muttering under my breath, but loud enough for other kindergarteners to hear, "I'd rather be pee than be germy like you." Little did I know that pee contains germs.

Recently, while I was paying for my art supplies at Blick, the cashier asked, "Fifi, were you born on Friday?" I gave him a look that said *how do you know my name and who in the world are you?* The answer to my first question was my driver's license and credit card in his hand.

"I'm sorry, I'm being weird," he continued. "I'm from Ghana, and we name girls Fifi if they are born on Friday."

With my newly acquired information, I rushed to my Ghanaian friend Ohema to confirm if what the cashier had said was true. "No...We name girls Afia if they are born on Friday. Fifi is a nickname for Afia," she answered. I figured what they said was true. So I looked up my real birthdate and, to my astonishment, found out that I was...born on a Thursday.

Nevertheless, my name is Fifi. It's my birth certificate name and contrary to the popular belief among my friends, my naming was not profound. It turns out that my mom used my name as a way to get back at my dad's ex-wife. Dad's ex-wife named my half brother Pierre instead of Peter, and my mom wanted to show her that she would do just the same. Don't ask me how that works; it just does in my mom's world. After my birth, my mom went through a baby name book and liked what Josephina meant: Fifi happened to be the French form. It means "God will add," and he truly has.

It started as a hate-hate relationship, with me sulking almost every other day because of my arch-nemesis, my name. In second grade, I was so fed up with being teased that I unofficially changed it to Josefina in class. I simply started to write Josefina #27 instead of Fifi #27 on my papers. It was a difficult transition because the other children disregarded the change and continued to call me Fifi. As ridiculous as it seems, this news spread to the principal because a month later she presented me with a Certificate of Achievement for Josefina Young. I regret to inform you that Josefina died a few weeks later because it wasn't working out for me. After accumulating a collection of papers with Josefina's name and getting over the fact that my name is unusual and permanent, I decided to make the best of it. I ended up liking it because I also accepted that I am a little strange and therefore, it suits me well. In a way, my

name shaped who I am today; I feel that I am more open to unusual names, ideas, and what not. And even though it is my nature to be mean, I learned to not make fun of other people's names because I know how it feels to be made fun of and having to defend my name, too.

Part of the reason why I think of names so much is because of Neil Gaiman's writing. In his short children's novel Coraline he wrote, "Now, you people have names. That's because you don't know who you are." This idea is so intriguing; he's basically saying that we need names to have a sense of identity...to know who we are. With this in mind, I have learned that names are integral to our identity.

As I researched, I was surprised to find that there have been plenty of studies and discussions on names alone. To my disappointment, unusual names are highly discouraged by many people today. They argue on the basis of psychological and sociological implications of names; how a child would be ridiculed, how the name will stick for the entirety of the child's life, how in many cases unusually named children do poorly in school. York University Linguistics professor and past president of the American Names Society, Sheila Embleton believes that having an unusual name "is often a real handicap. Parents forget the kid is going to live with this name for life and they forget the consequences. Imagine some girl called Gessica with a 'G.' She's always going to have to spell out her name. I feel sorry for her" (qtd. in Grace 1). I agree with her about how the child with an uncommon name-Gessica in this hypothetical case-would be ridiculed, as I have first hand experience. However, I would not feel sorry for Gessica because her name is a part of who she is. She would grow up knowing that she is Gessica, not Jessica, and having to explain that it's with a "G" would

be a part of who she is. It's her unique identity. Furthermore, names might not always be a negative factor because there is a study that proves having an atypical name does not damage one's education or any aspect of life.

In the 70s, a group of scientists studied the psychological effects of unusual names. They took a sample of 82 men and 34 women from Wesleyan University in Connecticut with abnormal names and studied how they scored on the California Psychological Inventory. The purpose of this inventory is to evaluate the interpersonal and social interaction of a person based on 18 scales including poise, ascendancy, self-assurance, interpersonal adequacy, socialization, responsibility, values, character, achievement potential, intellectual efficiency, and interest (California Psychological Inventory 1). How the test subjects scored was compared to their peers with conventional names.

Results showed that unusual named males differed to their peers in only one out of the 18 scales of the CPI. They scored slightly lower on Intellectual Efficiency. On the other hand, the women scored significantly higher in 17 of the CPI scales (Cook, Fontenelle, and Lounsbury 204). Researchers redid this test on women, for it wasn't clear why the unusually named women scored better, so another 34 common named women were selected to be compared. The result was comparable to the first test: the unusually named women scored better on 14 of the scales.

The researchers concluded, "whatever the reason for the unusual named women scoring higher on the CPI, and whatever the extent to which they did score higher, it is clear that neither men nor women appear to be at a psychological disadvantage as a result of having an unusual first name" (205). I agree because, speaking for myself, I

never had academic problems in school or felt that I was lacking in any other area like responsibility, poise, or interest. Sure, I had fights in school because of my name, but it never hindered me from doing well in and out of a classroom.

Speaking of uncommon names, I feel that androgynous names are interesting and it's not surprising that the same scientists conducted a study of androgynous and sexually misleading names. While in Switzerland, parents are prohibited from giving children names that do not clearly indicate the child's sex, this practice, although infrequent, is seen in American culture. The question is, are children with ambiguous names at a disadvantage psychologically?

The same study was conducted with the CPI scores. This time, 49 names that were thought to be appropriate for both male and female children were selected from the undergraduate students of Wesleyan University to be compared to 49 peers who have gender appropriate names. The 35 men scored similarly to their peers. On the other hand, the 14 women differed significantly in two areas. In the Capacity for Success, the women with questionable names scored higher while scoring lower on Femininity.

The three scientists concluded that due to the subjective nature of whether or not a name is sexually misleading, "there is no evidence in these data to support the dire predilections for the 'boy named Sue syndrome'" (206), meaning there is no concrete proof of the psychological disadvantage to having an androgynous name. However, if I interpreted this information myself, I would say that this test is saying that success is a masculine quality, as women with normal names didn't score as high as the women with boyish names. And these women with ambiguous names are...butch. Even though I

am responsible for this interpretation, it does not sit too well for me, especially because I have a friend with a boy name and she is not butch. In fact, she is very delicate.

Her name is Herschel Joy Robel. On many occasions, I have talked to Joy about her name. In a recent conversation over the phone, I found out that her parents didn't know that Herschel was a boy name, they simply wanted a meaningful name so they had combined her dad's name Hector, with her grandma's name Rachel. Herschel! Because Joy sincerely loved her first name, she wanted to save it, like saving her favorite part of dinner and coming back to it after finishing everything else. That's why Joy has been going by her middle name since she was young. I asked her when she found out it was a boy's name.

"Oh, in 8th grade," she answered. "I was reading a science book and there was a scientist named Herschel, and it kept saying he did this and he did that, and I was like 'IT'S A GUY'S NAME?'" She paused while I laughed and then continued, "In freshman year of high school I was at a football game and there was a player named Herschel Williams and I was thinking '...wait, that's my name!' And during orientation there was a guy with the same name in my O-group, who was a guy, and I was shocked."

"For how long?" I asked.

"One or two...three days. And I got over it. It's just weird for me to introduce myself as Herschel...but it's my name."

"How do you feel when someone calls you Herschel?" I wanted to know.

"It's weird. I would think, 'That's my name, too' I'm just not used to it...it's like having two names but just one name is like, I don't know, not better....Herschel has the same effect as Joy, but like one second slower," she rambled. I think she was trying to

say that it takes a second more to register that she's being called. Finally, I asked her if she knew what Herschel meant. Since she didn't, I kindly went online and found out it means "Deer."

On the other side of the line, Joy said, "Awww, man. Deer? I wish it was a cuter meaning like bunny or hamster. Because they're cute." Let me tell you, Joy is anything but butch and I strongly believe, despite what research may show, that people with sexually misleading names are not at a disadvantage.

In my mind, Lucas, used commonly as a boy name, will henceforth be a girl name. It means Light in Latin, and although I could chose other names for girls with the same meaning like Lumina or Luz, I am stubbornly going to stick with Lucas. I figure this name is too pretty for a boy, anyway. I doubt a girl would mind being called Lucas; I know a girl named Michael and she doesn't seem to mind that her name is generally a boy's name. There should be no sexism in regards to name in the first place; break the chains that bind society to sexism.

I personally would not mind having a boy name. On a more serious note, consider not having a name. That would probably bother me more than anything else. During my research, I came across an article called "Does Everyone Have a Name? Psychological Distress and Quality of Life Among Child Holocaust Survivors With Lost Identity" by Marianne Amir and Rachel Lev-Wiesel. The article shared how when a child doesn't know his name, his sense of security is disrupted and this can lead to a negative psychological effect. A good example of this happening to an overwhelming number of children was during World War II. At the time, Jewish parents hid their children with non-Jewish families. With the new family, the children were given new

identities. The children who were put into Catholic institutions “lost all trace of their original identity” (860). Though the survivors generally made a good enough living for themselves, there are some difficulties they still face, simply because they do not know their real names.

As an attempt to research the implication of lost identity, a study was conducted in 1999. Regarding the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the quality of life (QoL) for Holocaust survivors, 23 survivors who didn’t know their true names were compared to 23 survivors who knew their names. Through the use of the PTSD scale and the WHOQOL-Bref instrument to assess the quality of life, researchers were able to gather data from the survivors.

As a result of the study, we have learned that both groups suffered the same amount of post-traumatic stress, but there were differences in their QoL. Studies showed that “survivors with lost identity had significantly lower physiological, psychological, and social QoL and had significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and somatization compared to those who had retained their identity” (865). Who would have thought that not having a name would bring such complications? Now that I think about it, it makes sense. Essentially, not knowing our name is like not knowing our identity. And when we don’t know who we are, of course, we’ll have troubles with socializing and depression or anxiety. This brings us back to Neil Gaiman’s idea of names and identity: we need names because we don’t know who we are.

With all of my research combined, I came to the conclusion that uncommon or androgynous names do not psychologically damage a person while not having a name does. Names are what we make of it; it shapes our identity but not negatively. Take

Joy and myself for example. Although we have felt some sort of alienation because of our names, we have never faced any major problems. We do pretty well in school and though we may tend to be on a slightly socially awkward side, it has not been a big issue. On the other hand, not having a name harms a person mentally and socially because it's like not having an identity. It doesn't matter whether our name is androgynous, normal, or uncommon, as long as we have a one. Names help us sense who we are; names are important component of our identity.

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